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A STUDY OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH, AN INFORMAL STUDY.

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A BRIEF STUDY OF THE FRESHMAN ENGLISH CURRICULUM FOCUSES, FOR THE MOST PART, UPON STATE UNIVERSITIES. A DESCRIPTION IS GIVEN OF THE PHILOSOPHY UNDERLYING THE COURSE, INCLUDING SUCH MATTERS AS STAFFING AND ORIENTATION OF TEACHERS, ARTICULATION WITH FEEDER SCHOOLS, AND THE EFFECT OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN RHETORIC, LOGIC, AND LANGUAGE STUDY. TEXT BOOKS, GRADING, AND CLASS SIZE ALSO ARE DISCUSSED BRIEFLY. THE PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY INDICATE A NEED TO UPGRADE FRESHMAN ENGLISH, A STEP WHICH PRESUPPOSES ADMINISTRATIVE RECOGNITION OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH AS THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE COURSE IN THE UNIVERSITY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "COLLEGE ENGLISH," VOLUME 28, NUMBER 8, MAY 1967, PAGES 596-600. (BN)

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A Study of Freshman English: An Informal Summary

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FRESHMAN ENGLISH CAN BE a crashing bore or it can be a delight—to the teacher as well as the student. To the neophyte graduate assistant disarmingly free of preconceptions, it can be a baptism of fire. The freshman English director may decide to program him like a robot from the first class to the final exam, or may simply hand him an approved book list and hope for the best. There is, as we all know, little uniformity from one university to the next in the way freshman English is being taught or administered.

In this investigation, carried out independently during the academic year 1966-67, I set out to consider not only matters of freshman English curriculum but the philosophy underlying the course as a whole, including such matters as staffing and orientation of teachers, articulation with feeder schools, and the impact of recent developments in rhetoric, logic and language study on the freshman course. Some of these topics proved less productive than others. But thanks to the cooperation of the various freshman English directors across the country, I was able to distill a great deal of fairly provocative information.

In deciding to initiate the project, I was stimulated by (1) my own experiences as a teacher of freshman English and then as a secondary school administrator, (2) the seminal thoughts of Albert R. Kitzhaber and others, and (3) a growing conviction that the conduct of freshman English is properly of first importance to any university worthy of the name.

Harrison Hoblitzelle, formerly a member of the English department at Columbia University, in the fall will teach and serve as Director of International Programs at Brandeis University.

Coverage

The Study focuses upon certain representative public (in most cases, State) universities with selected student bodies: the University of California (Berkeley), State University of New York (Stony Brook), University of Oregon, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, University of Virginia, University of Massachusetts, and The City College (New York). New York University is included, as are two other private institutions, Harvard and Stanford, in so far as new developments in their freshman programs may lend themselves to wider application.

Class size and sectioning

The size of individual classes ranges from 17 at the University of Virginia to "sometimes as many as 30" at another, less fortunate in its budgetary cut. The average is 22 students.

Sectioning is most often done on a random basis, after exemption of students (commonly 6 to 8 per cent of the total number of entering freshman) with College Board scores of 650-670 or above plus a 4 or 5 on the Advanced Placement exam. Several institutions permit exemption by a special exam taken at the beginning of the term.

N.Y.U. follows the practice of setting up special sections for those planning to major in English.

Remedial sections are disappearing from the scene. Remedial students, of whom there are still plenty, are being integrated into regular sections and furnished with special exercises on an individual basis by means of a programmed text (e.g. Blumenthal's 3200).

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Course Content

The standard pattern, as might be expected, is to require a full academic year of freshman English requiring 8,000 to 10,000 words of student writing—and revision. Typically the first third is centered on composition ("rhetoric") *per se*, with the remaining two thirds devoted to the study of literature, generally using the types approach.

Oregon is especially thorough in keeping the focus upon the problems of writing: the first quarter is devoted to logic and/or rhetoric, the second to research (as opposed to "re-search"), and the third to advanced rhetoric and style.

A strong thematic line in the organization of freshman readings is still proving to be the best way to capture student interest. Stanford, for example, leads its students into a quarter devoted to a consideration of "the quality of modern life" with the sure-fire collection of topical essays, *Beyond Berkeley*, ed. Katolpe and Zolbrod.

Books

Books about which there was particular enthusiasm or which were found useful by two or more departments:

Baker, *The Practical Stylist*
Gibson, *The Limits of Language*
Guerard, *The Personal Voice*
Kane and Peters, *A Practical Rhetoric of Expository Prose*
Martin and Ohmann, *The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition*
Perrin, *A Writer's Guide and Index to English*

There are nearly as many favored books as there are freshman English directors, yet amid the proliferation there appeared at least one area of unfulfilled need. As one respondent wrote, "We would like to have a good rhetoric-handbook under 400 pages but have not found such an animal."

Linguistics and Language Study

There is general agreement that the linguists have not yet come up with a good text for freshmen. At any rate I found none in use. Most promising—if one could squeeze it in—(according to one composition director) might be W. Nelson Francis' *The English Language*, "which can remove students' fears of language by giving them some understanding of how it works and what it is."

But language study in general, although most pay lip service to its value as a background study, is still a long way from finding a spot in the crowded freshman English curriculum. Structural linguistics and generative grammar, in particular, are even further from making an impact on the freshman course, since there has been no proof so far of a correlation with the development of the ability to write.

The University of Virginia department of Engineering English has experimented with a programmed logic text but found that though their students do indeed learn logic, their writing is not much affected.

Articulation

The University of California holds an annual conference at Berkeley for high school teachers and counsellors to explain its "Subject A" and other English requirements. The other institutions queried confine their efforts to the occasional mailing and rely on the informal contacts of staff members at NCTE meetings. One harried composition director summed up the dilemma of most: "We *talk* articulation, but we can't seem to do much about it."

Grading

Most of the departments consulted make use of occasional theme grading sessions and regular staff meetings to achieve a certain uniformity in grading practice. As an added check, themes at North Carolina are kept in a file and

periodically spot checked by the director. Michigan has begun to have a joint reading of the examination modeled on Advance Placement Readings.

Oregon, after considering the subject of grading in its composition seminar (see below), encourages its instructors if they feel so inclined to put no grades on compositions for the first few weeks of the term, a practice which allegedly "causes students to read the instructor's comments like a love letter, alive to every nuance. . . ." At Stanford students who are tired of the stick-and-carrot technique may elect a non-graded section (actually a cumulative grade is given at the end of the year).

Innovations

Harvard and Stanford are experimenting with new writing programs for freshmen and others that may be of some practical interest to the public universities.

The Harvard Expository Writing Program is this year offering "Middle Group" seminars that are open to upperclassmen and to freshmen with advanced standing in English and College Board scores of unusual distinction. Focusing upon the relationship between writing and the demands of particular disciplines, the seminars bear such names as Exposition and Historical Inquiry, Exposition and Literary Analysis, and Exposition and Scientific Method.

The freshman English staff at Stanford, seeking to bring its program out of the classroom and make it a central part of freshman life, helps to organize a series of activities (in which upperclassmen are encouraged to participate): a film series, an art show, play readings, and publication of a magazine.

A hundred Stanford freshmen are taking part in the "Voice Project," an experimental writing program, fathered by Educational Services Incorporated and supported by the U. S. Office of Education. Under visiting creative writers they study the relationship of the spoken voice to the particular "voice" discernible in good prose.

Staff, Orientation, and Administration

For reasons of thrift, ninety per cent of the freshman English classes in the universities are staffed by graduate students teaching part time. On one campus faculty wives are also employed to fill the gap. But there are some exceptions to the pattern. At Berkeley, where each section man has an assistant, the freshman English roster every year includes several of the most distinguished members of the department. At N.Y.U. the freshman course is taught chiefly by full time instructors, supplemented here and there by men of senior rank. At C.C.N.Y. I found the strongest departmental participation in the teaching of freshman; its English professors at all ranks normally teach a section every year.

The foregoing is not meant to imply that the younger teachers are not in many cases extremely effective in the classroom. But it does point up the importance of staff preparation, orientation and—to use the word in its French sense—control.

The initial question is quite pragmatic. How can the freshman course be given on a large scale (to a thousand or more students) by a largely inexperienced staff? The problem can be approached directly, of course, as at Michigan and North Carolina by providing a detailed syllabus and plan of assignments, and by making available additional aids, such as exercises, theme topics, detailed lesson plans, etc. (Oregon and Michigan provide instructors, students and sometimes feeder schools with a very helpful compendium of ground rules and useful freshman English information—including photocopies of several typical freshman themes, fully graded and commented upon.) One large urban university outside this study goes to the extreme of rigidly prescribing the teacher's every move and even—ostensibly to prevent

plagiarism—requires that all student writing be done in class. At the other end of the scale, one of the universities under consideration here relies largely on the inspiration of the individual teacher; there is no syllabus and only the most general of guide lines. New teaching assistants "have their own meetings," the director writes, but he adds that they are visited in their classes.

Other questions are equally basic. How best can a graduate student, whose mind is often preoccupied with higher degrees, be turned into an effective composition teacher? After all, most will spend a good part of their early professional life in the teaching of writing. Should the responsibility for training rest primarily with the freshman composition director or with the graduate English department itself? (One may pass over those estimable institutions which simply do not regard this as a problem relevant to them or their students—e.g., the department head who boasts that his new Ph.D.s rarely have to teach a lower division course of any kind much less, thank God, freshman English.)

For orientation and in-service training, the University of Massachusetts conducts a workshop of two or three days before the first semester and two one-day workshops each semester.

An Integrated Training Program

In a 1959 address before the NCTE, Albert Kitzhaber warned of the widespread failure of college English departments (1) to recognize sufficiently that the teaching of language and writing is one of their inescapable responsibilities, and (2) to include among the requirements for future English teachers appropriate training courses. Today, though the truth of this warning is widely accepted, relatively little action has been taken.

The University of Oregon, appropriately enough, presents the best example of an integrated training program for graduate students. There is a seminar in the teaching of college composition that includes, besides some language study, consideration of certain pertinent articles gathered for the most part from past issues of *College English* and the *CCC Journal*. These "Readings in Freshman Composition" are arranged under the following six headings: I, The Personal Encounter; II, Schemes, Systems and Syllabi: The Administration of Freshman English; III, Teaching Rhetoric to Freshmen; IV, Linguistics and Freshman English; V, Some Things that Work: a Pragmatic Collection; VI, Literature in the Composition Course. The articles are a distillation of a great deal of experience and represent some of the most pointed things that have been said on the subject: what it takes to teach composition and what it means to teach composition. The seminar's purpose is to give the young teacher enough sophistication about the freshman course in all its varieties to teach it well wherever he finds himself and whatever he is given to work with. This year, in addition, Oregon is initiating for all first year graduate students a student teaching program involving five senior professors. (Oregon's own freshman English course, referred to earlier, is a model of flexibility and sophistication; the teacher gets not only guidance but plenty of leeway in planning his own syllabus.)

In establishing the domain of freshman English, Oregon owes its success to effective lobbying as well as skilled leadership. Other institutions that would pursue the same goals are held back by long standing budgetary restrictions.

The Role of Freshman English in the University

Six of the nine universities studied here suffer in varying degrees from the failure of their administrators to accept what one might call the political significance, let alone academic importance, of freshman English. Ignoring the plain fact that the course is the most direct link between

the University and the people of the State, the department chairman at one burgeoning institution stated that the needs of the freshman must continue to take a back seat to the building up of a glamorous graduate faculty. One wonders how long the legislature will tolerate this inequity.

Across the country the freshman course is too often regarded as a place to economize. It might be of some significance that the freshman English directors at more than half of the universities in this survey are of junior (less than tenure) rank. The irony is brought home when one is reminded that freshman English is the one course that virtually every student must take. Its teachers perform a potentially vital service; they and their director are very much in the public eye.

This fall Richard Goldstone in a postscript for newcomers to his freshman English staff at C.C.N.Y. summed up the teacher's responsibility. "We are above all public servants of the citizens of the state of New York," he wrote. "No other college teacher's labors are more carefully attended than our own. The care and devotion we expend on a student's paper is appraised by the student's parents, relatives, neighbors, and friends; even the student himself sometimes glances at our analysis of his work. . . . The public's good image of this department and of the college is our creation."

The preliminary findings of this study show a widespread need to upgrade freshman English, a step which clearly presupposes administrative recognition of freshman English as the University's most important single course.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

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